

BIRDS!

Duck!



By Ltjg. Don Gaines

We were on the final leg of a three-leg, round-robin flight around Texas, near the end of T-34C intermediates. The previous two flights were mostly in and out of clouds, but since these were RI flights, I wasn't too concerned. However, climbing through 1,000 feet on the final leg, we were in the goo. As we continued our climb, we reached VFR-on-top by 3,000 feet. While my instructor listened to the HIWAS for weather updates, I was dodging thunder cells.

Once we were told to switch to center for the PAR into NAS Corpus Christi, we both breathed a sigh of relief. When I contacted center, they told us there were lots of birds in the area. I looked up and noticed a flock off to our 3 o'clock low, but they were no factor.

Calling them out, I went right back to the task at hand, flying the approach—this was for a grade, you know. I trimmed out the aircraft and was setting up my instruments for the TACAN approach when I looked up to see something very bad. A wall of birds was flying right at us. I had enough time to yell over the ICS, “Birds!” and then ducked behind the console. A second later, I could feel the rush of air in the cockpit and things flying around as we passed through the flock.

I sat there for a few seconds just watching everything move in slow motion when I heard my instructor yelling over the ICS, “Are you OK?” Looking up, I saw the windscreen had a large hole in it. One piece was still connected to the aircraft but flapping in the wind. The



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magnetic compass, which sat on the console, and one of the mirrors were now missing, and the other mirror was shattered. As I looked into the shattered mirror, I could see blood covering my face and helmet, and I noticed a cut on my lower lip. I raised my visor and noticed the distinct line of blood where the visor ended. Besides the cut lip, I was in good shape and finally called back that I was fine. Then, as any good student would, I told my instructor a bird had just hit us. Laughing, he called back, “No kidding, most of it is sitting in my lap.”

He took the controls, and while I hit 7700 on the transponder, he declared an emergency. Center gave us a discreet squawk when another aircraft called up asking for our working area. They thought we were simulating this. Center immediately called over guard for all aircraft to maintain their positions, while they

handled an actual emergency. As the radio calls continued, with aircraft offering their assistance, we now started working the task at hand—getting on deck. Looking at my console, my instructor asked me to move the approach plates. We still had all the VFR and IFR charts and approach plates sitting on the console. Grabbing my flight bag, I quickly stuffed all of them into it. I then pulled out the pocket checklist for bird strikes, and my instructor called for a climb to 5,000 feet. He said we needed to check out the aircraft and see if we could land it or if the birds had damaged anything underneath. When he said to be prepared to ditch if the aircraft rolled, I kept thinking how I couldn’t believe this was happening to me.

As we slowed to landing airspeed, I felt my heart beating. He lowered the gear, and we sighed in relief as we saw three-down-and-locked. He then set up for a straight-in, and as we crossed the threshold, I saw the fire trucks and ambulance, which followed us to a stop. We taxied off the runway and shut down on the taxiway, then hopped out and thanked each other for a job well done. Looking at the aircraft, it seemed that just one bird had caused the damage.

We talked about the things we could have done better. I was flying a simulated instrument approach. We were responsible for our own VFR clearances. I should have kept scanning outside, grade or no grade. We initially wanted to just land the aircraft. We realized we first needed to take care of the emergency. That’s when my instructor called for a climb to altitude. There was the distraction of multiple calls over the radio. Between the other aircraft asking for our working area, offering their assistance, and center’s responses, comms were extremely difficult.

We did some things well. Neither of us lost his head. We calmly divided the emergency tasks, and once we realized we needed to do the checklist items, we went through them quickly and calmly. Although we were nearing the end of a long day of simulated and actual instrument work, I learned to always keep in mind the responsibility we all bear: to see and avoid. 

Ltjg. Gaines flies with HC-11.